

DUXBURY HISTORY FILE
REFERENCE

'There are so many businesses in gourmet food that have their noses up in the air. But food is fun. Food is entertaining. Why not start with fun right from the beginning?'

RAYMOND K. LEMIRE, Duxbury owner of Flying Noodle pasta company

Whimsy boosts mail-order business

By Judith Montminy
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

DUXBURY - Cartoon characters with rigatoni bodies sail through the air under macaroni shell parachutes. Winged noodles flit about.

These whimsical images adorn packages of pasta and sauce, pasta-of-the-month club newsletters, and the World Wide Web site of Flying Noodle, the mail order pasta company owned by the "Big Parmesan," Raymond K. Lemire of Duxbury.

Lemire started the Flying Noodle in Vermont two years ago but moved it to Duxbury last spring when his wife, Lisa, became a manager in strategic planning for Ocean Spray in Lakeville.

Right from the start, Lemire, 42, said he knew he wanted fun and whimsy to be a key part of his company. With little money for advertising, he had to create an identity that would be catchy and easily remembered.

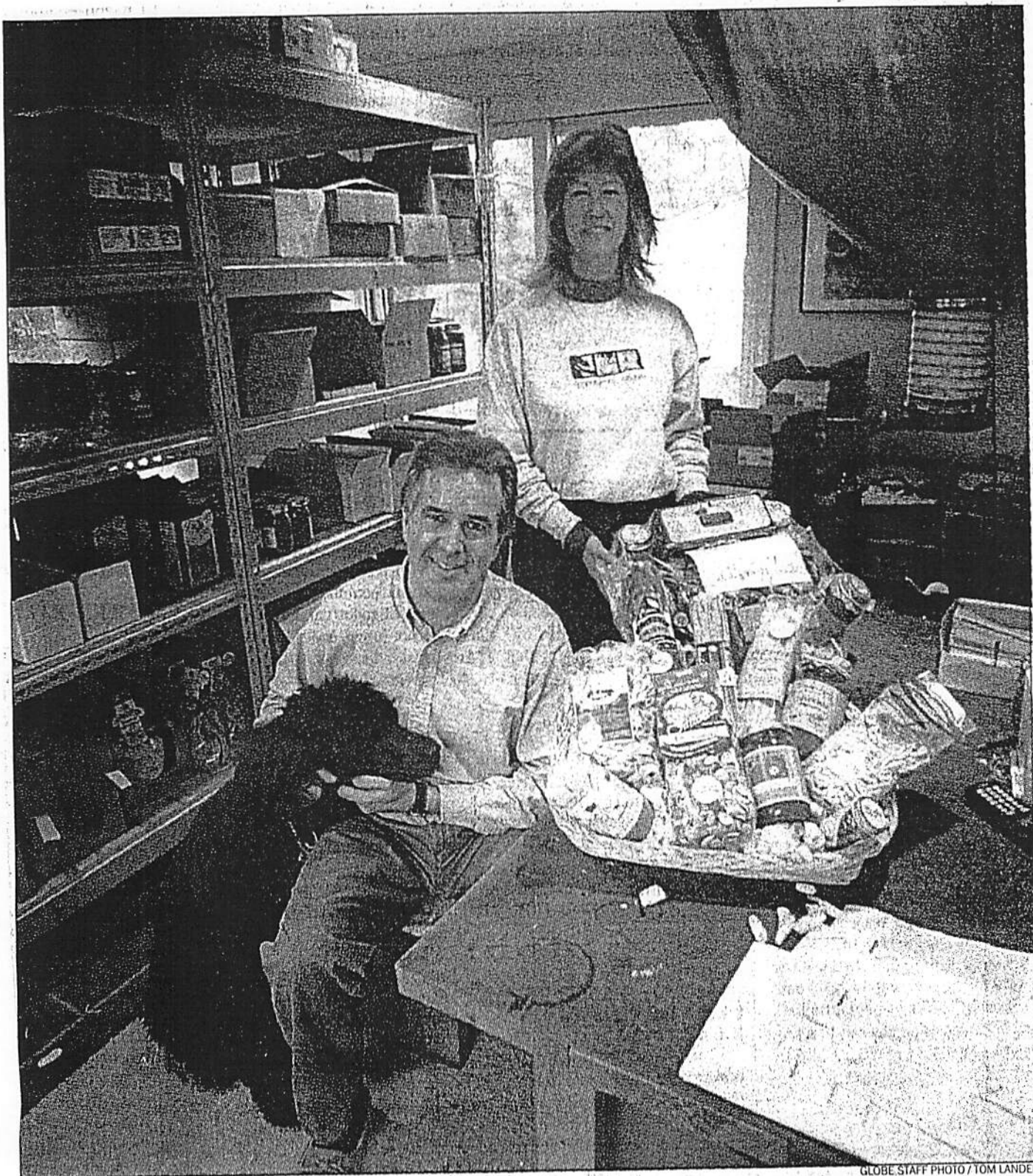
"I needed a name that was going to stand out," Lemire said. "There are so many businesses in gourmet food that have their noses up in the air. But food is fun. Food is entertaining. Why not start with fun right from the beginning?"

The fun-filled pasta-based characters were introduced in December 1995 when Lemire launched his web site (www.flying-noodle.com). A designer friend's teenage daughter created the original cartoons that her father later refined into the company's logo, complete with pasta spelling out the word 'Flying' on the company's letterhead.

Another sign of his whimsical and irreverent business approach is the presence of his standard poodle, Sydney, a mainstay both in the company brochure and at Lemire's feet in his second-floor bedroom-turned-office.

Lemire's work days are busy doing what he likes to do best - chatting on the telephone, testing new products, and creating recipes that use the pasta and sauces he carries. All have to take 15 minutes or less to prepare. "All you have to know is how to boil water" is Lemire's often repeated mantra. He and his wife eat pasta five to six times a week.

PASTA, Page 13



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / TOM LANDERS

With Sydney the standard poodle at his side, Raymond Lemire and his wife, Lisa, display some of the pasta products they send out.

■ PASTA

Continued from Page 11

During December, when he did more than 50 percent of his business for the year, Lemire hardly had time to boil anything. Last month's sales of \$85,000 were triple the sales for December 1996. Total sales in 1997 reached \$180,000, a point Lemire calls "break even." One of the top sellers continues to be a tomato vodka cream sauce, "Mom's spaghetti sauce," from a Texas company. Another personal favorite and big seller is Elena's tomato basil pappardalle.

"So '98 will be profitable," Lemire said. "I knew I would either make it or not, knowing that if it works, I'd be in a much better situation than if I go to work for someone else. ... I'd rather take a risk on myself."

With a bachelor of fine arts in dance and a master's degree in business from York University in his native Toronto, Lemire had spent several years running luxury bicycling and walking tours for companies in France and Vermont. In 1994 when the Vermont company he headed merged with its competitor, Lemire was relegated to the number-two spot, a position he did not want.

"I'm not happy if I'm not going to be number one," he said. He left the new touring company. "It was like, OK, now what do we do?"

He made a list of what he would like to do with his life. "It kept coming up 'food,'" he said. "Food" combined both his love of cooking and eating well and his business experience and logistics flair.

"Working with the bicycle tours I did a lot of setting up menus with different chefs along the way. In college, I had worked as a manager or a waiter in restaurants. ... I'm always a yakker,

"So many people don't eat well because they don't know what to cook," he said. "I thought, if [my new business] is going to be food, how am I going to put good food together quickly?"

Pasta was the food that met all of his criteria - it is healthful, easy to prepare, and part of a growth industry.

"Ten years ago, pasta was an ethnic food, now it's a staple," Lemire said. "Pasta sales [nation-wide] have been growing 30 percent for each of the past five years."

Pasta also is well-suited to direct mail, a form of retailing that gives Lemire a chance to indulge himself as a self-described "chatterbox" with customers. He tries to make everything about his company fun, including ordering from him. Thirty percent of his sales come through the Internet, largely because Lemire's site is easy to find and user-friendly. A handful of other companies on the Internet offer similar pasta club programs. Lemire tries to make his site interesting by updating it weekly and by adding new information and fun recipes.

Ever-changing, his product list includes 80 pastas and 40 sauces. A one-month order includes 8 to 10 servings with two gourmet pastas, two sauces, and recipes. The cost is \$19.95 plus \$5.95 shipping. All recipes can be prepared in 15 minutes or less.

"The stuff we get is hard-to-find gourmet store items," he said. The pastas and sauces are made by small gourmet manufacturers from the United States and Italy.

The manufacturing process is what distinguishes Flying Noodle's pastas from the mass-produced supermarket varieties, Lemire said. "Similar to the differences in micro-breweries versus the large breweries," he said. "But there's nothing wrong with taking a Prince spaghetti and jazzing it up with a good sauce."

Now that Flying Noodle is at the break even point, Lemire is looking to expand his space and his offerings. He hopes to build his corporate gifts accounts. Gift baskets with complete meals for under \$30 - Italian dinners with breadsticks, antipasto, pasta, sauce, and dessert - are in the works. Eventually, Lemire expects Oriental noodles to become as familiar as pasta is today. "Five years down the road, Oriental noodles will become a staple," he said. He expects to offer direct mail Asian dinners, as well.

"I think we have to keep making it interesting for people," Lemire said. "We have to come up with other ideas to keep people buying from us."

FYI

On Feb. 7-8, Flying Noodle will be at the Boston Wine and Food Show at the World Trade Center in Boston, where it will sell to the public.

For more information about Flying Noodle, call 781-934-1519 or 800-566-0599.

speaking with chefs and with customers," Lemire said. "I've always been able to cook well and quickly. ... In high school, I'm the kid taking cooking classes instead of shop."